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Militant Conversion in a Prison of the Mind: Malcolm X and Spinoza on Domination and Freedom

Malcolm X was a key African American political leader throughout the 1950s and 1960s until his assassination in 1965. His Black nationalism, his championing of Black rights against racial inequality, and the 'self-made' narrative of his own life, as related in the posthumously published *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (X and Haley, 1965a), have contributed to an enduring influence. As Trevin Jones observes, *The Autobiography* has become highly popular in American prisons because 'Malcolm's life demonstrates to inmates the power of knowledge, the pursuit of truth, and the courage to face the unknown' (2020, p. 431). Such characteristics are found in the memoirs of other inspirational political figureheads, from Mahatma Gandhi to Nelson Mandela, but Malcolm's narrative is distinguished by its emphasis on his own conversion from aimless rage, petty criminality and political docility towards militancy, Islam and the pursuit of knowledge while in prison. A series of readings, reflections and discussions impressed on him, as well as on some fellow African American prisoners, the importance of actively studying the historical, political, and socioeconomic bases of power and racial inequality for organising resistance and contestation. Sawyer notes 'the difficulty of disentangling the activist Malcolm X from the political philosopher' (2020, p. 30). Understandably, given Malcolm's dramatic and remarkable life, his many contributions to public debates and his status in relation to the civil rights movements, alongside his adept, argumentative speeches and distinct understanding of Black nationalism, scholarship has tended to emphasise aspects of that influence that are either predominantly biographical or (less often) theoretical.[1] However, in this paper, I wish to propose that these theoretical and biographical aspects are intimately connected by attending specifically to the significance of 'conversion' and 'prison' as

both spatiotemporal sites and theoretical frames for approaching and critiquing power. By conversion I refer not to religious conversion specifically, significant as that was for Malcolm, but rather to the broader transformation of one's moral and political outlook, and the effort to transform that of others. Malcolm's understanding of 'prison' and 'freedom' was developed through reflection and study during his incarceration, helping establish a narrative framework for conceiving of wider American society (with its unequal relations of racial power) as a prison, both across society (as in restricting life chances, opportunities, and political and social rights for African Americans) and within the mind (as in restricting the self-esteem, motivation or powers of understanding necessary for African Americans to challenge the prevailing inegalitarian order). This understanding tells us two important things about the status of domination and freedom, not only in Malcolm's own thought but also in subsequent debates in contemporary political thought.

First, Malcolm's prison narrative places incarceration and domination in a new perspective that is attentive to their embodied, intellectual and societal features. Although prison begins as spatial confinement, imprisonment can also occur on historical, affective or intellectual levels. A lack of historical awareness, self-hatred and diminished pride, or having little capacity to inquire and understand the nature of power and the causes of disempowerment can all imprison. Malcolm also repeatedly argues that American society is itself a 'political, economic, and mental prison' (X, 2018, p. 95; cf. X and Haley, 1965a, p. 381; X, 1965b, pp. 8, 169; 1971, pp. 150–151; 2018, pp. 380, 522, 675, 702, 756) severely curtailing African Americans' agency and supplying merely an illusion of freedom. This in turn indicates the possible sources of liberation from such a 'prison'. Malcolm considers education, particularly that fostering historical and political awareness, as well as the qualities of sobriety and pride, to be critical. He

also advocates separate and self-reliant Black communities that support a wider global resistance to white oppression and imperialism.

As I shall argue, Malcolm X's contention that unfreedom is a condition of mental, physical and societal subjugation to authority involves a radical extension of the contemporary liberal understanding of freedom as mere non-interference with certain, limited civic rights. It also involves a powerful reframing of the struggle for Black 'freedom, equality and justice' (1965b, p. 51; 1971, pp. 103, 144–145, 183; 2018, pp. 8, 10, 17, 75, 163, 169, 174, 182, 456, 458, 626; cf. Karim in X, 1971, p. 19) – the often-repeated ideals of Malcolm's politics and understanding of Islam – onto a wider terrain of philosophical liberation, forged through political struggle and self-determination. Essential to this reframing is Malcolm's notion of 'conversion'. Conversion requires that Black individuals and communities who have accepted, naturalised and abandoned resistance to the legacies of enslavement and ongoing racism and who have been subjugated by 'brainwashing', (e.g., 1965b, p. 172; variants are also used thirty-eight times in 1965a), experience a decisive transformation in worldview and thinking. Such changing 'thought-patterns' (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 340) might then empower collective action against domination.

Second, and more speculatively, I want to explore a rather unexpected ally invoked by Malcolm as part of his conversion to a new philosophical and political outlook – the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677), who was referred to positively, if peculiarly, by Malcolm as a 'black Spanish Jew' (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 180).[2] This somewhat rhetorical choice is nonetheless appropriate and revealing because Spinoza's philosophy likewise addresses philosophical conversion, resistance to states of deception and domination, and

freedom understood as both philosophical and political in nature. Although there is insufficient evidence in Malcolm's writings and extant speeches to cast Spinoza as a significant influence, both thinkers can be productively brought together on this common interest in conversion, domination and freedom. For instance, Spinoza's thought can be critically compared with some of the limitations in Malcolm's account of Black freedom – particularly its underlying levels of prejudice, and (up to his schism with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam) its deference to theological and personal authority. I shall explore these issues as problems of *epistemic agency*, by which I mean one's capacity to reason and understand. I shall also argue that Malcolm's understanding of political organisation and agitation as prerequisites for collective freedom might be used to highlight the limitations of Spinoza's vision of a democratic public mindset underpinning a democratic commonwealth. I shall explore these as problems of *civic agency*, by which I mean the capacity of citizens to participate in the institutions and decision-making of the state. In other words, the main advantage of bringing these thinkers together is not just to better understand one or the other, but rather to better understand their common interest in issues of domination and freedom at the societal level.

This paper is organised as follows. The first part outlines Malcolm's account of domination and freedom in terms of conversion, education and Black nationalism, before identifying a problem of epistemic agency. The second part analyses the nature of conversion, domination and freedom in Spinoza's thought, focusing on states of deception and the difficulties of fostering democratic civic agency in monarchical regimes. The third part compares their approaches and identifies a similar understanding of freedom as constituted by mental and physical power of a social and collective (rather than wholly individual) nature.

Prison and Conversion in Malcolm X

In this section, I shall first explore how Malcolm X narrates his conversion from criminality, docility and directionless rage to a 'mentally alive' militancy (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 179), before analysing the appearance of Spinoza in his account. I shall then assess some of the broader features of domination and liberation, which are often implicitly contained in *The Autobiography*, as well as Malcolm's speeches and debates, before introducing some challenges facing his account.

The life and death of Malcolm X (born Malcolm Little in Nebraska, 1925, and murdered in New York City in 1965) have become as influential as any of his given speeches or activism, be it as a figurehead in the Nation of Islam or later as an international Black human rights campaigner. This is partly the result of Malcolm's own efforts in writing his *Autobiography* between 1963 and 1965, alongside co-writer Alex Haley. Together, they craft the conversion narrative of Malcolm rescuing himself from a life of crime and immorality as 'Detroit Red', a petty hustler in Harlem, and moving towards religious faith, self-discipline and Black nationalism. Malcolm's spell in prison, after receiving a ten-year sentence for burglary in 1946, was the decisive moment of transformation in this militant *Bildungsroman*. His first year at the decrepit Charlestown State Prison was characterised by illicit drug use and atheistic rage (he was nicknamed 'Satan' for his diatribes against the Christian God, which led to bouts of solitary confinement). It capped a period that was marked by traumatic life events and a sense of disorientation that Malcolm later described as akin to feeling 'dead – mentally dead' (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 125). As a child, Malcolm's family home had been burned down by white supremacists, who had also killed four of his uncles, and at the age of six, his father Earl Little was murdered by white supremacists in an incident ruled a suicide by coroners (X and Haley, 1965a, pp. 10–11). Malcolm's mother Louise suffered a mental

breakdown from which she never fully recovered, and despite being diligent at school, Malcolm's aspirations were stymied by the racist attitudes of white teachers (X and Haley, 1965a, pp. 27, 36). As he began to reflect in his cell on these traumatic events, as well as his subsequent drift into criminality and the feelings of rage and self-hatred that this inspired, Malcolm came to consider these aspects of his and many other Black lives as being structurally caused by living within white America (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 169). This lead him to transform his life, convert to Islam and formulate the principles and practices of Black nationalism. These principles were brought about by three aspects that in turn reflect the three modes of conversion that appear in Malcolm's later speeches: self-education; discipline and study; and turning anger into action through political organisation and persuasion. This account will help contextualise the wider reframing of prison as a mental and societal condition, from which the conditions of conversion and liberation can then be discerned.

According to Malcolm's self-narration, the influence of others was critical in instigating his conversion. A friendship with an older Black prisoner, John Bembry ('Bimbi'), encouraged Malcolm to take an interest in philosophy and literature. Bimbi impressed him as 'the first man I had ever seen command total respect … with his words' (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 154). Bimbi's influence over white and Black prisoners alike stemmed from his wide learning and proficiency in public debates, and he encouraged Malcolm to take correspondence courses. Also crucial was Malcolm's contact with his brothers Reginald and Wilfred, both of whom had become members of the emerging Nation of Islam in Detroit and guided Malcolm towards its brand of Black separatist Islam (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 161; cf. Payne and Payne, 2020, pp. 267–274). The brothers' father had been a visiting Baptist preacher but also an organiser for Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, which championed Black

self-reliance, self-respect, historical awareness and a return to Africa. Elements of this emphasis on self-reliance arose from a distrust of Christianity as a 'white man's religion' imposed on African Americans to instil docility and a sense of racial inferiority (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 220; X, 2018, p. 22). Reginald used examples from Malcolm's criminal life to demonstrate that Malcolm had been exploited by white Americans, who profited from his criminal ventures without the same risks. 'After Reginald left, I thought. I thought' (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 159).

Malcolm therefore found himself attracted to the Nation of Islam. He wrote regularly to Elijah Muhammad, its leader and self-proclaimed messenger of Allah. This literal conversion was important. As Jones notes, like other African American inmates, Malcolm was drawn to the Nation's 'heavy emphasis on Black identity and manhood' (2020, p. 421; cf. Marable, 2011, p. 78). As Malcolm put it in an interview, it offered a sense of universal human dignity of a kind reminiscent of Garveyism but freed of any Christian associations: 'in Islam a man is regarded as a human being. He's not measured by the color of his skin' (X, 2018, p. 361). This universalism would later develop into a further conversion away from the Nation's racially prejudiced worldview and towards one focused on global human rights.

The catalyst for conversion was not so much Islam itself, but the possibility of a militant study that could provide both a means of mental and physical liberation and a basis for converting others towards action against domination. By militant study, I refer to any study undertaken with the aim of actively combating and transforming societal conditions and political relations of power. Malcolm places 'books' as the central ingredient of his conversion towards a new mental life:

> Mr. Muhammad, to whom I was writing daily, had no idea of what a new world had opened up to me through my efforts to document his teachings in books. … I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive.' (X and Haley, 1965a, pp. 178–179)

These periods of reflection were accompanied by indefatigable reading. Books are described as 'intellectual vitamins' – consumables that introduce new ideas and increase the capacity to think (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 391). '[F]from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk' (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 173). Reading opportunities had been provided by his transfer to the progressive Norfolk Prison Colony in 1948. This experimental institution had been founded in 1927 by Howard Gill, a reformer who proposed a new form of rehabilitation in a setting without bars, uniforms, guns or isolation (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 157; Tucker, 2017, pp. 194–196). Its vast library, donated by Senator Lewis Parkhurst in 1931, specialised in history and religion. Malcolm's favourite books included Frederick Bodmer's *The Loom of Language*; Durant's *The Story of Civilization*; H.G. Wells' *Outline of History*; W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Soul of Black Folks*; as well as the writings of Gandhi, Mendel, abolitionist tracts, and the economics of cotton slave plantations (X and Haley, 1965a, pp. 175–176, 393). This reading history indicates Malcolm's specific focus on understanding the historical development of cultural, political, racial and economic power in the USA. In the process, he describes periods of feeling no longer imprisoned: 'Between Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my correspondence, my visitors . . . and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned . . . In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life' (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 173).

Malcolm's account is interesting not so much for the profound emphasis on education, discipline and intellectual strength, reflective of the emphasis put on Black education by Du Bois (2007, pp. 61–75) and Carter Woodson (1933, p. 144), but rather for the challenge to the social and political framework by this militant form of reading. We learn this in an unexpected moment, about halfway through *The Autobiography*, when Malcolm recalls studying the history of philosophy:

> Gradually, I read most of the old philosophers, Occidental and Oriental. The Oriental philosophers were the ones I came to prefer; finally, my impression was that most Occidental philosophy had largely been borrowed from the Oriental thinkers. (X and Haley 1965a, p. 179)

Although Malcolm discounted certain philosophers in the European tradition for generating the conditions of fascism (Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche), or for wasting time 'arguing about things that are not really important', one figure stands out: 'Spinoza impressed me for a while when I found out that he was black. A black Spanish Jew' (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 180). But in what sense is Spinoza 'Black'? Aside from brief remarks in a popular account that Malcolm probably read (where Spinoza is characterised as being of 'the orient', 'oriental', with 'skin somewhat black' in Durant 1926, pp. 162, 173, 179, 206), which moreover stresses Spinoza's Sephardic Jewish background, Spinoza's Blackness is intimated through his narrative of persecution and resistance. As Malcolm puts it:

> The Jews excommunicated him because he advocated a pantheistic doctrine, something like the 'allness of God', or 'God in everything'. The Jews read their burial services for Spinoza, meaning that he was dead as far as they were concerned; his family was run out of Spain, they ended up in Holland.[3]

Aspects of the Nation of Islam's cosmology were broadly pantheistic, i.e., Elijah Muhammad's doctrine that God is embodied and took the form of Wallace Fard, the founder of the Nation of Islam. This image of the otherworldly and persecuted 'prince of philosophy' is common in biographies of Spinoza, from those by Jonathan Israel and Gilles Deleuze back to early and mid-twentieth-century accounts by Stuart Hampshire, Leo Strauss and Bertrand Russell. It is worth singling out here the influence of Will Durant, a now largely forgotten Canadian philosopher whose 'Little Blue Books' introduced millions, including Malcolm X at the Norfolk Prison Colony, to the history of philosophy.[4] Common across these images of Spinoza are not just the references to persecution (e.g., the *cherem*, the legendary knife-attack outside the theatre or synagogue), but also Spinoza's characterisation as someone who resisted societal persecution through his philosophical vision ('he advocated a pantheistic doctrine') and challenged the structures of power and domination through his thought. For Malcolm, Spinoza's attention to things that 'are really important' lies in his contribution to resistance against oppression, specifically to the historical white oppression of Black people. Spinoza appears halfway through Malcolm's rather sweeping account of western philosophy that considers it to have supressed Black achievements and culture, a 'gigantic… fraud' arising from an 'elaborate, neurotic necessity to hide the black man's true role in history' (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 180). In many speeches and debates, Malcolm referenced the purposeful erasure of Black historical achievements and culture and its interweaving with racial inequality, which contributed to widespread feelings of Black self-hatred and inferiority, and in turn formed a wider 'prison' or 'chain' of colour (X, 1965b, p. 169; 2018, pp. 675, 756) that perpetuated this inequality.[5]

It is striking that Spinoza is invoked immediately before this decisive statement on Black historical consciousness. This invocation initially raises more questions than

answers, for Spinoza had virtually nothing to say about transatlantic slavery or the culture of the Africans whom the Dutch had encountered and (in the case of the short-lived colony in Pernambuco, Brazil) enslaved in significant numbers (Taylor, 2021, p. 41, Diefenbach 2018, pp. 277–289). Spinoza is not mentioned anywhere else in Malcolm's writings and speeches. Indeed, few writers are, and, in fact, Spinoza numbers among a handful of thinkers given any positive mention by Malcolm. The invocation has in part, then, a rhetorical function: Spinoza is an anomaly who defied the political and intellectual constraints of his society through a dedicated, militant form of study that was aimed towards philosophical liberation. Whether Malcolm read Spinoza closely or not becomes less important: Spinoza is employed for his contribution to an intellectual and biographical resistance to domination.

Malcolm's focus on militant study was motivated by his indignation at social injustice: '[m]y homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America' (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 179). His friend Malcolm 'Shorty' Jarvis, jailed on the same burglary charge and also transferred to Norfolk, reflects similarly:

> Malcolm and I couldn't believe that society had put us away the way they had, and we were just two people out to rebel against it. In our own way. Now the only way we knew how to rebel was to cram some knowledge into our brains. (Tucker, 2017, p. 194)

But why was 'cramming knowledge' or consuming 'intellectual vitamins' of any political significance? The answer lies in the fact that such activity involves three elements recognisable throughout *The Autobiography* and Malcolm's speeches and debates: first, the naturalisation of inferiority and the habituation of shame and self-loathing (*affective*

and intellectual subjugation); second, the extension of patterns of depressed thought and action that perpetuate docility and discourage an understanding of that subjugation and therefore the motivation to resist it (*psychosocial domination*); and third, the importance of mental liberation. Garvey emphasised the third of these elements as a means by which to 'emancipate ourselves from mental slavery' (Grant, 2009, p. 442);[6] this required the development of an understanding of the historical, political and economic bases of domination and power, by which to foster the attitudes, beliefs and systems capable of organising a Black nationalist struggle towards freedom (*mental liberation for militant struggle*).

Inspired by Bimbi, Malcolm participated in the prison's popular debating society, and he began to convert his fellow African American prisoners to the ideas of the Nation of Islam. He cultivated a technique that employed historical awareness, pride and blame to rupture the three elements of domination above. Under the influence of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm's opening salvo was a provocative, racist inversion of the feelings of inferiority and shame that he detected in his fellow inmates. By claiming that 'the white man is a devil', he aimed to strike at the 'nerve center in the American black man' (X and Haley, 1965a, pp. 378, 183). Such tactics went beyond vilification and scapegoating to function as a purgative capable of bringing about a radical transformation in perspective, whereby individualised failure, criminalisation and self-loathing were instead considered the indirect and inevitable effects of living in a racially unequal and unjust society:

> You let this caged-up black man start thinking, the same way I did when I first heard Elijah Muhammad's teachings: let him start thinking how, with better breaks when he was young and ambitious he might have been a lawyer, a doctor,

a scientist, anything. You let this caged-up black man start realizing, as I did, how from the first landing of the first slave ship, the millions of black men in America have been like sheep in a den of wolves. (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 183)

A number of speeches and debates deploy a similar tripartite formula: 1) African Americans have internalised racist ideas and images that have habituated feelings of inferiority and deference – often referred to as a 'chain', or a social and 'mental prison' (e.g., X and Haley, 1965a, p. 169; X, 2018, pp. 95, 380); 2) these have perpetuated and legitimised racial inequality and suppressed natural responses of anger and resistance (e.g., X, 1965b, p. 5; 1971, pp. 132, 137; X and Haley, 1965a, pp. 265, 272); and 3) militant resistance to this racial inequality requires historical awareness, political study and a new 'self-help philosophy' that turns anger into action (X, 2018, p. 332; 1965b, p. 8; 1971, pp. 39–50; X and Haley, 1965a, pp. 182, 340).[7]

Malcolm argued that American society was itself a form of prison that required a mental and physical jailbreak: analogies and references to 'chains', 'prison' and 'brainwashing' are often repeated in his speeches and writing. Elijah Muhammad had already made this claim, and he later adopts a strikingly similar perspective to Malcolm's, if relayed in characteristically oblique style ('She holds a whole nation (so-called Negroes) prisoner, and refuses to open the door of freedom, justice and equality to them', 1965, p. 110). Whereas Malcolm broadly shares the Nation's view that resistance to domination comes through Garveyist separation and self-reliance, his own distinct position emerges later in emphasising global solidarity, human rights and postcolonial resistance. In his 'Message to the Grassroots', Malcolm describes prison as a shared state of social servitude: '[D]on't be shocked when I say that I was in prison. You're still in prison. That's what America means: prison' (1965b, p. 8). Malcolm's

counsel here recalls that offered to his fellow prisoners at Norfolk – to actively study and develop a new understanding of the historical, political and economic bases of power and racial inequality, in order to motivate resistance and politically organise to transform that inequality.

Malcolm also outlines what Sawyer calls a 'trilateral' understanding of oppression in its political, economic and social forms (2020, p. 11), namely one centred on Black democracy, public ownership and self-control. In the 'Declaration of Independence', his first public address after leaving the Nation in March 1964, he distils it rather simply: 'The political philosophy of black nationalism means: we must control the politics and the politicians of our community' (X, 1965b, p. 21). 'The Ballot or the Bullet' offers a fuller outline of this new philosophy. It necessitates that 'we should control the economy of our community', as well as establishing a 're-education program in the black community in regards to economics', and separately, 'the science of politics' (X, 1965b, pp. 38–39). Socially, it involves welfare programmes focused on reducing alcohol and drug addiction, aligned with wider Islamic positions on sobriety. Politically, it involves embracing a militant demand for universal human rights and recognition, and not merely civil rights.

There is an important tension evident in Malcolm's thinking at this point. On the one hand, its Garveyist arguments for Black self-reliance and separation are, in theory, ecumenical – he often appeals to Christians and insists that Black nationalism is open to all religions. On the other hand, his earlier modes of persuasion ('the white man is a devil') and the racism, anti-Semitism and misogyny of the Nation of Islam, of which he was national representative until 1964, emerge from a racially essentialised prejudice that repelled many African Americans as well as wider non-Black allies. Furthermore,

Malcolm found himself caught in the difficult position of extolling another man's worldview and esoteric theology. Elijah Muhammad was distinctly opposed to any form of party politics or participation in the political process, and ruled the Nation like an unaccountable monarch. He promoted an understanding of Islam that was substantially different from that taught in the Qur'an, and was marred by extramarital affairs condemned by the Nation's own teachings (X and Haley, 1965a, p. 295; Marable, 2011, pp. 269–295; Payne and Payne, 2021, pp. 421–435). *The Autobiography* and many of Malcolm's public addresses stumble on this fundamental problem of epistemic agency. There is an uneasy coexistence between an uncritical deference to a theological-monarchical authority and a liberationist politics founded on militant study, which actually tended to recruit economically disadvantaged men into a racially prejudiced and politically disinterested organisation.

The historical and personal reasons for Malcolm's break from the Nation are complex and cannot be accounted for here. What is significant is the impasse that the militant conversion narrative had reached. Having dramatised societal captivity ('prison'), assigned blame ('white man is the devil') and motivated resistance via a moral appeal to societal injustice, Malcolm's view of liberation points to a rupture of the prevailing inegalitarian order driven by Black political organisation and societal revolution that simply could not be accommodated within the belief system and practices of the Nation. Moreover, the rage and resentment of its racially essentialised blame of the 'white devil' afforded only a short-term burst of motivational agency, which temporarily united the disaffected, while alienating Black moderates and white Americans. Although, as Malcolm's contemporary and admirer James Baldwin noted, rage and trauma were apt, just and powerful responses ('To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time', in

Hughes, 2022, p. 218), the problem remained that small separatist struggles could not themselves foster the wider collective mental and physical liberation required to achieve freedom, equality and justice for Black Americans at a societal level. . That is why it is worth now turning to Spinoza, that unexpected ally, who also struggled with the problem of determining freedom for individuals at a collective level in societies wracked by sectarianism, violent authoritarianism, prejudice and fear. Spinoza's work anticipates the problem faced by Malcolm before his break with the Nation and offers a fourth element required for militant conversion in a social prison – fostering a wider democratic and egalitarian civic mindset.

Deception and Deliberation in Spinoza

Spinoza's life and thought are often introduced in terms of a philosophical conversion, which he himself narrates in his earliest extant work, the unfinished *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (written around 1663). He writes:

> After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would … continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity. (*TIE* 1)[8]

The pursuit of this philosophical good encounters three obstacles ('wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure'), which cause the mind to be so distracted that 'it cannot give the slightest thought to any other good' (*TIE* 3). Spinoza's rather Stoic formulation was uncontroversial for this period; what is significant is that it begins by staging the mind's

freedom as the pursuit of a form of freedom much inhibited by his society's prevailing forms of prestige and hierarchy. Pursuing this freedom is also framed in terms of the advantages and empowerment that it affords others. His aim is 'to acquire such a nature, and to strive that many others acquire it with me', so that 'it is part of my happiness to take pains that many others may understand as I understand, so that their intellect and desire agree entirely with my intellect and desire' (*TIE* 14; cf. *E*4p35). In other words, Spinoza argues that cultivating a philosophical and ethical way of life will benefit a given community around him if it comes to share those philosophical and ethical goals.

This rather implicit staging – but one that does not give any consideration to domination at this point – becomes much more apparent in the *Ethics* (published posthumously in 1677), which redefines human freedom and power in terms of natural knowledge, cooperation and the disciplining of the passive affects. The reward of understanding Spinoza's metaphysics is *beatitudo*, a 'blessedness' or supreme contentment that consists 'in the knowledge of God alone', understood not theologically but scientifically as a true understanding of the order of nature (*E*2p49s; *E*5p32, *E*5p36s). Such a condition reflects a power or 'freedom' of the mind to understand, one that has overcome the *servitudo* (which translated as servitude, but is often rendered 'bondage') of the passive affects.[9] This knowledge results in a corresponding affects of joy, and engenders a desire to teach others, cultivate friendships with those also seeking understanding, and to live an actively political and social life concerned with achieving peace, cooperation and democracy (*E*4p18–p37).

But there are difficulties facing this rosy vision of freedom. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza is also concerned with *impotentia*, our inability to restrain our passive 'sad' affects (being

those which involve in a diminution in our power of acting, containing different species of sad affect like hatred or fear), or to recognise how our basic need to be relieved of uncertainty amid adversity results in credulous beliefs in omens and superstitions, as well as the wider 'sanctuary of ignorance' that constitutes most forms of organised religion (*E*1 app). This *impotentia* reflects our natural condition. As finite beings, we are infinitely surpassed in power by external forces, whose cause or nature we mostly fail to understand, and our daily lives are dedicated to our material needs. Thus, our minds inevitably develop 'prejudices', such as that, in order to serve our needs, all nature was purposefully created by an anthropomorphic God, who rewards "His" worship and punishes sinners. For Spinoza, this was to make God 'as mad as men' (*E*1 app). This *impotentia* of causal reasoning, driven by passive ideas of the imagination, renders us susceptible to narratives, customs and superstitions that collectively weaken our capacity to understand and act.

Omens and superstitions are discussed extensively in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670). That work's multifaceted conception of servitude broadly coalesces around the incapacity to think or act that results from assenting to and adopting the authorities' ideas and practices as one's own. In response to adversity or violence, weakened minds either take refuge in false, harmful superstitions or are overcome by their own passive affects (which are often sad ones, like hatred and fear). Consequently, they abandon interest in attempting to understand for prejudices and magical thinking that usurps the order of nature. Nothing is more dangerous for free philosophy.

But Spinoza holds that if we can shed our sad passions and passive, reactionary beliefs by moving to a democratic politics of critical, collegial reasoning, then political and philosophical benefits will abound. Spinoza's *TTP* discusses how the deliberative

assemblies of democracy would not only make more representative and reasonable political decisions than a monarchy, but also 'collegially' increase the power of its participants to philosophise (*TTP* 16.26; 20.2; cf. Taylor 2021, p. 54; Lærke 2021, pp. 134–142). In order to defend the 'freedom of philosophizing', as the book claims on its title page, the work critiques the status of denaturalised, divinified knowledge based on miracles, prophecy and censorship. For Spinoza, there can be no understanding of the conditions of freedom without first determining the ways in which we are not free. This is outlined in the Preface, where servitude is associated with the rule of monarchy:

> The greatest secret of monarchic rule, and its main interest, is to keep men deceived, and to cloak in the specious name of religion the fear by which they must be checked, so that they will fight for slavery as they would for their survival, and will think it not shameful, but a most honorable achievement, to give their life and blood that one man may have a ground for boasting. (*TTP* Preface, 10)

Two processes are at work here. First, the monarch's ability, aided by religious powers, to dominate the minds and bodies of its subjects so that they lose control of even their most basic essence - in Spinoza's view, their 'natural right' of striving to persevere in being (*TTP* 16.2), the 'conatus' of the *Ethics*. Religion, and the specious promises of ambitious clerics, relieve the affective misery that arises from uncertainty amid adversity. Spinoza's condemnation of unchecked ecclesiastical power is targeted at the ambitious Calvinists of the Dutch Reformed Church, who desired to replace the state's liberal, mercantile government with a conservative monarchy under the House of Orange. This first process we can call, for now, political domination.

But in that 'fear by which they must be checked', a second process is implicitly present, relating to the *servitudo* and *impotentia* of the *Ethics*. What is this fear? It occurs when our minds and bodies respond to the inevitable adversities of striving to meet our needs with beliefs that attempt to soothe any uncertainty. As the beginning of the *TTP* makes clear,

> If men could manage all their affairs by a definite plan, or if fortune were always favourable to them, no one would be in the grip of superstition. But often they are in such a tight spot that they cannot decide on any plan. Then they usually vacillate wretchedly between hope and fear, desiring immoderately the uncertain goods of fortune, and ready to believe anything whatever. (Preface, 1)

Such beliefs often result in specious credulity, enabling a politics of fear that can captivate minds on a mass scale, as in that vast carceral society that Malcolm later speaks of. Spinoza describes hope and fear as an 'inconstant joy [or sadness], arising from the image of a thing future or past, of whose outcome we are in doubt' (*E*3p18s2). Hope or fear 'cannot be good in themselves' because each involves not just uncertainty but also a motivation to act despite that uncertainty (*E*3p47). It is from what Martin Saar calls our shared 'existential structure of uncertainty' that we fall under the weight of sad passions, with hopes and fears that pacify the present, making it more bearable at the expense of a true understanding of its causes (2015, p. 123).

We can draw two claims from Spinoza's outline above. First, all human beings are considered to fall under a 'servitude' or domination to ideas and affects of an external origin, which leave us passive and unable to reason for ourselves (an elementary *universal servitude*). This becomes a problem when we inevitably experience adversity in the pursuit of our needs and look around for sources of hope,

rendering us credulous to ill-founded superstitions. This leads to the second and more troubling claim that ambitious regimes utilise and exploit the fears and uncertainty of the public by 'embellish[ing] religion – whether the religion is true or illusory – with ceremony and pomp' (*TTP* Preface, 10) in order to deceive and control the minds of their subjects. While Spinoza appealed to seventeenth-century Dutch prejudice by narrating this as representative of life in the Ottoman Empire, which was marked by 'slavery', 'barbarism' and absolute obedience (*TTP* Preface, 9; *TP* 6.4), elsewhere in the *TTP* such states of 'deception' do not uniquely belong to certain despised nations, but are more generally features of societies in which free philosophy is stifled. We can call this the problem of *tyrannical popular authority*. In such regimes, subjects accept the authority of the tyrant because it promises to relieve them of the hefty burden of uncertainty and fear. Moreover, as Curley (1995) and Field (2020, p. 170) have separately shown, such regimes can be remarkably enduring, so long as they are able, by promising to relieve fears while simultaneously diminishing powers of reasoning, to mobilise the subjects of the state into serving its institutions of power.

In this respect, Spinoza is among the first in the modern tradition to account for how rulers dominate the minds of the subjugated. While in the *Ethics* and *TTP* this is presented in terms of the exploitation of the credulity that arises from natural adversity and our weakened powers of causal reasoning, in the final, incomplete, *Tractatus Politicus* (1677) Spinoza expands on his view. He connects mental power with freedom to argue that 'a mind is completely its own master just to the extent that it can use reason rightly' (*TP* 2.10–11). Given that human power should be measured 'not so much by the strength of the body as by the strength of mind', it follows that 'people are most their own masters when they can exert the most power with their reason' (*TP* 2.11). The inability to reason or think for oneself makes one susceptible to indoctrination by

powerful individuals, whose beliefs and practices are passively adopted as one's own. Therefore, those dedicated to public freedom should encourage others to think for themselves. Spinoza often uses the term 'slave' to describe this state of supreme lack of control whereby one cannot think for oneself. Sometimes one is a 'slave' to personal emotions and desires (*E*4p66), and sometimes one is physically 'under the command' of another, particularly an authority that demands the transfer of rights, including the right to free thought (*TTP* 16.32–35).

Naturally, Spinoza is interested in how philosophy can correct and liberate such enslaved minds, and the *TTP* is his most sustained account of how the *ingenia* (mentalities) of subjects can be directed towards democratic life. He differs from Hobbes by viewing state formation in terms of mutually beneficial cooperation rather than mutual fear (*TTP* 16.12–13), and argues that the shared mentality of a nation or people is transmitted not through natural essences, but rather through 'laws and customs', which preserve and propagate the values, beliefs, and practices of different groups (*TTP* 17.93). Laws and customs are alterable, but also persistent. In his narrative of the Hebrew Republic under Moses, Spinoza remarks that members were bound together 'by devotion to their country' and 'a hatred not only permitted, but even pious, regarding everyone as hostile' (*TTP* 17.82). This helped them to resist foreign occupation and persist as a unified people long after their state's disappearance. Spinoza's politics are relatively unrevolutionary (admittedly an anachronistic term) in that he argues that the freedom of philosophising and wider collective liberation are achievable only through accommodation with the prevailing 'mentality' of the people – i.e., their existing values, customs, culture and beliefs (e.g., *TTP* 4.19, 4.33, 5.7; Steinberg calls this the 'accommodationist method', 2018, pp. 121–123).

Therefore, Vardoulakis (2020) is right to criticise Spinozist scholars who argue that Spinoza is committed to a revolutionary politics of desire (e.g., Lordon, 2014). Vardoulakis stresses that those who 'willingly' fight under a monarch who enslaves them suffer not from a lack of imagination, desire or power of will, but rather from an inability to calculate their own utility – a failure of instrumental reasoning or *phronesis* (2020, pp. 67–70, 151). Such a capacity to think, Vardoulakis argues, cannot be recovered through a forceful expression of indignation, but only by fostering the capacity for instrumental reasoning. Spinoza defended the freedom of philosophising, and published treatises demonstrating the possibility of human freedom without reference to an organised religious belief system, because, by showing how superstitions, political domination and fear might be dispelled by increased reason and understanding, he wishes to empower all human beings. In this sense, we have now come full circle with the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*.

However Spinoza thought it unrealistic to consider such epistemic agency instantly achievable on a societal level. Instead, it was the responsibility of the Dutch state's prudent leaders to foster and instil a democratic civic mindset. It is for this reason that the *TTP* emphasises the cultivation of an ecumenical 'universal faith' or national religion that is focused on fostering cooperation and peace (*TTP* 14.10–33). Such an institution, whose ecclesiastics are stripped of political authority, would not accommodate itself to existing mentalities, but would instead gently educate its adherents, aided by a political culture that valued 'brotherly advice, good education, and above all, one's own free judgement (*TTP* 7.90) But, as Spinoza was also aware, accomplishing this *ex nihilo* was immensely difficult, hence the at-times unconvincing contortions made in the text to present it as consistent with the prevailing orthodoxy of

its Reformed Calvinist readers, for instance in its deification of Jesus Christ or the deceptively unflattering analogy of the Hebrew Republic.

For Spinoza, human freedom was realised by increasing the capacity to understand and act – an ethical and epistemological position that committed him to democratic politics. However, he struggled to balance the burden of this liberatory position against what he considered the 'prudent' need to accommodate one's politics to the existing values, attitudes and customs of society. This pragmatism had a sound basis: societies needed to be peaceful, secure and cooperative to provide safe conditions for the pursuit of philosophy. In Spinoza's Dutch Republic, sedition was most feared from militant Calvinists who were opposed to the country's liberal republican values and who wishes to limit the freedom of philosophising and install monarchy. But Spinoza's position left completely unresolved the expectations placed on subjects and citizens in a state (he offers no account of citizenship, an important concept for contemporaries such as Hobbes and Grotius), and the extent to which the defenders of free philosophy should attempt to persuade, publish, agitate and organise, to challenge the stifling and often popular power of monarchical and ecclesiastical authorities. In ways that Spinoza could not have anticipated when writing the *TTP* – the Dutch United Provinces was subject to an unexpected invasion by France, England and neighbouring German states two years after its publication – the republic that he sought to defend would soon collapse, to be replaced by a de facto monarchy aided by a Calvinist church hostile to free philosophising. Despite an unremitting, consistent and insightful focus on the philosophical and political conditions of universal human liberation, one comparable to Malcolm's ideals of freedom, equality and justice, Spinoza's model of conversion largely operates at the individual level – an important level for epistemic

agency, but one less able to speak to the importance of converting others and building a counterpower capable of dismantling tyranny.

'Liberating Our Minds': From Thought to Action

Malcolm was preoccupied with how minds fall under the power of alien and disempowering forces; I noted the frequency of terms such as 'brainwashing', 'chains' and 'prison' earlier. Often accompanying such terms in Malcolm's speeches and writing is an image of captivated minds being led astray ('They put your mind right in a bag, and take it wherever they want', 2018, p. 753). Spinoza, in a different way, also argues that minds can come under the domination and power of others, as when monarchical or ecclesiastical authorities exploit fears and uncertainty with stupefying but compelling consolations. I have also noted the emphasis on mental emancipation and freedom in both thinkers, both of whom employ a model of liberation that begins in the individual mind and is led towards political struggle or reform; this explains the emphasis on developing the capacity to reason and understand. These capacities prefigure and determine political action because they inoculate against the ignorance and fear used to legitimise and perpetuate societal inequality.

But what is the relationship between liberating thought and liberating action? By 1964, Malcolm was outlining how a Black nationalist 'self-help program' first required a new 'self-help philosophy' and 'thought pattern' capable of directing effective action. In 'The Ballot or the Bullet', he remarks

> Once you change your philosophy, you change your thought pattern. Once you change your thought pattern, you change your attitude. Once you change your attitude, it changes your behaviour pattern and then you go on into some action. (2018, p. 332)[10]

Malcolm's proposals for such 'action' were clear. He rejected the pacifist 'sit-down thought' of other civil rights leaders, whose actions were achieving little, in his eyes, except exposing Black communities to more violence. He thus turned instead towards a global politics of postcolonial nationalism, inspired by African and Asian independence movements (e.g., X, 1971, pp. 203–204). But he returns to the question of how mental liberation contributes to political liberation in the 'Program' of the OAAU, which was to be presented on the day he was assassinated. Comparable to Dr King's 'Poor People's Campaign' (also left incomplete by the time of his assassination), this Program was marked by a new shift towards universal human freedom (but led by Black political struggle), and by a deeper insistence on cultivating historical, political, philosophical and economic awareness. The OAAU's basic aims were 'Self-determination' and 'National unity'; and their five-part 'Basic Unity Program' was sub-headed with the terms 'Restoration', 'Reorientation', 'Education', 'Economic Security' and 'Self-Defense' (2018, pp. 821–823). The account of reorientation is significant here: it involves learning, a change in one's thinking, and the liberation of minds. As the OAAU Program sets out:

> In order to keep the Afro-American enslaved, it was necessary to limit our thinking to the shores of America – to prevent us from identifying our problems with the problems of other peoples of African origin. … The Organization of Afro-American Unity will develop in the Afro-American people a keen awareness of our relationship with the world at large and clarify our roles, rights, and responsibilities as human beings. We can accomplish this goal by … understanding that our struggle is part of a larger world struggle of oppressed peoples against all forms of oppression. We must change the thinking of the Afro-American by liberating our minds through the study of philosophies and

psychologies, cultures and languages that did not come from our racist oppressors. (2018, p. 822)

What matters for our purposes is that the militant struggle of this new organisation was aimed towards an international, universal vision of mental and physical liberation operating across society. Its programme for education encouraged 'Afro-Americans themselves to establish experimental institutes and educational workshops, liberation schools, and child-care centers in the Afro-American communities'. These institutions would aim to foster a critical, democratic, grassroots and communal power capable not only of resisting local racial domination but also of contributing to global Black liberation, which is to say, human liberation.

This does not dispel the tension between Black nationalist separation and an internationalist appeal to universal human rights and freedom – the OAAU was committed to the view that the former alone would pragmatically contribute to the latter. However, it ventures the position that, while militant-minded study is an essential aspect of a broader struggle for universal human rights and equality, it is not the only aspect ('We further realize that our human rights, so long suppressed, are the rights of all mankind everywhere' (2018, p. 829)). This vision of universal human freedom is glimpsed elsewhere in the Black radical tradition – e.g., in Huey Newton's vision of 'revolutionary intercommunalism', which abandons nationalism and prejudice for global solidarity and self-examination (2002, pp. 181–188).

The relation between domination, incarceration and freedom occupies a distinct place in the thought of both Spinoza and Malcolm X. Spinoza carefully avoided persecution for his writings, which were either unpublished or published anonymously by the time of his death; his friend Adriaan Koerbagh would die in prison (for publishing

radical philosophy) even as Spinoza was writing the *TTP*. For Malcolm X, prison was in a different way an important space for militant Black thought and study. First, physical confinement allowed organisations such as the Nation of Islam to reach and politicise African American prisoners, who had few other distractions and much time to read, resulting in some viewing prison as the inevitable effect of living in a racially unequal, unjust society (what Eldridge Cleaver would call the 'PPP cycle: prison–parole–prison', 1969, p. 62). But, second, it was viewed as a spatial reflection of a wider and more insidious limitation of African American freedom, self-image and life chances extending across American society. This extension itself is conceived of as a societal and mental prison. As Angela Davis puts it, 'the site of the jail or prison is not only material and objective but it's ideological and psychic as well' (2022, p. 22). Partly inspired by sources such as Garvey, Du Bois, Woodson and Elijah Muhammad, and by his own reflections, experiences and readings, Malcolm argued that education – understood as mental liberation – was a necessary catalyst for conversion and organisation toward militant struggle and Black nationalism.

In this article, I have argued that the narrative frames of conversion and imprisonment were significant in shaping both Malcolm X's and Spinoza's philosophy and political thought. Malcolm X uses these frames to set out a three-stage model of domination and freedom: affective and intellectual subjugation; psychosocial domination; and mental liberation for militant struggle. At the time of his assassination, Malcolm X was in the process of shifting away from the prejudices, bizarre cosmology and Black supremacism of the Nation of Islam to a politics of international human rights and postcolonial freedom, orientated around epistemic agency from within Black communities. Spinoza is likewise properly invoked as an ally owing to his concern with articulating how all human beings can develop their capacity to think and act – their

freedom. This is achieved through reasoning collegially in a democratic state, and through study that becomes militant by challenging the repressive authorities that stifle the freedom of philosophy through the politics of fear. Both thinkers promote militant study insofar as it leads to communal efforts to interrogate and establish a democratic counterpower to repressive authority – whether in the study circles of the OAAU or the collegial deliberation of Spinoza's envisioned assemblies. These unlikely allies attest to the struggle to understand the political, economic, psychological and affective bases of power, which is not merely an historical struggle but continues into the present.

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[1] Sawyer's insightful book is a good example of the theoretical approach, reconstructing a 'coherent philosophical system' while acknowledging textual difficulties (2020, p. 29). However, it has little account of Malcolm's intellectual development. Most accounts tend to emphasise his biographical and activist significance; see, as indicative, Ogbar 2005, pp. 19–22.

[2] This reference has been surprisingly unremarked upon by commentators – Glick (2016, pp. 206–212) first highlighted it.

[3] Malcolm adopted the anti-Semitism of the Nation and reproduced it in some earlier speeches. But by *The Autobiography* he had renounced all forms of racism, following his ejection from the Nation in late 1963 and *hajj* the following spring.

[4] Republished in 1926 as *The Story of Philosophy*, which became a bestseller. Malcolm cites Will and Ariel Durant's *The Story of Civilization* (11 vols., 1935–1975), but only volumes 1–4 had appeared by 1950, with vol. 8 (featuring Spinoza) published in 1963.

[5] While Malcolm does not cite his influence, this emphasis on self-hatred, resentment and the psychological trauma of racism is highly reminiscent of Fanon's 1952 *Black Skin, White Masks*, which was first translated into English two years after Malcolm's death.

[6] This appeal to mental liberation as a precursor to political liberation guides Bob Marley's 'Redemption Song' ('emancipate yourself from mental slavery') and forms a background to Gil Scott-Heron's 'The Revolution will not be Televised', and Public Enemy's 'Fight the Power' ('let's get down to business, mental self-defensive fitness').

[7] After Malcolm broke with the Nation there would be an additional 4), that resistance should also lead to a global, international consciousness and resistance to imperialism.

[8] *E* = *Ethics*; *TIE* = *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect; TP* = *Political Treatise; TTP* = *Theological-Political Treatise*. References in *Ethics* give part then proposition number, followed by these abbreviations: app = appendix; df = definition; p = proposition; s = scholium. References in *TTP* and *TP* indicate chapter then paragraph number. Translations used: Spinoza 1985, 2016 (Curley).

[9] Forming *Ethics* Part 4's title. Affects refer to the mind's ideas of the body's affections or changes in state: they are passive insofar as they are the result of external or internal causes of which we are not in control (*E*3p11).

[10] Taken from the transcript of 'The Ballot or Bullet' in Detroit, which differs significantly from the Cleveland version published in 1965b.